

NCOs and Values-Based Decision Making

By First Sergeant Edwin V. Blount



In the “Army of One,” senior leaders look to the NCO Corps to embrace a value system that develops character and to lead soldiers. The Army depends on its NCOs to create the environment and set the tempo for success in full-spectrum operations.

Successful NCOs anticipate change, exploit every opportunity to meet the unit’s objectives and motivate their subordinates to higher levels of productivity to achieve the unit’s goals. Successful sergeants promote Army Values and take care of soldiers in the process. In short, they are leaders with values-based decision-making skills.

Full-spectrum operations is a concept based on the realization that modern wars most likely will be fought with more high-technology forces in complex terrain. These include offensive and defensive operations in major theater wars (MTWs) down to stability and support operations (SASO). These operations often will be conducted on an expanded, nonlinear battlefield.

Full-spectrum operations demand that NCOs master the art of leading soldiers in any situation. This makes developing quality leaders with mature decision-making skills a priority for the NCO Corps.

Developing Quality Leaders. While many civilian organizations seek individuals they hope already have honed essential leadership abilities, the NCO Corps “grows” leaders, instilling the leadership qualities and skills in its young soldiers. The NCO Corps accomplishes this by having young soldiers participate in different courses and training and perform in different jobs. This exposes them repeatedly to the applicable environments, developing their insight to anticipate change and skills to exploit the opportunities change presents and teaching them how to inspire subordinates to higher levels of productivity to meet unit objectives. Successful NCOs are uninhibited by constraints that would be considered daunting, and they place no boundaries or limitations on accomplishing their goals.

Successful NCOs accomplish full-spectrum missions by being task-oriented and persuasive and tactful in influencing others. Their influence, however, would be short-lived without keen conceptual skills, task competence, good human relation skills, and a sense of self-confidence.

Conceptual Skills. These are “general analytical ability, logical thinking, pro-

iciency in concept formation and conceptualization of complex and ambiguous relationships, creativity in idea generation and problem solving, ability to analyze events and perceive trends, anticipate changes, and recognize opportunities and potential problems.¹¹ These skills are essential for NCOs' effective planning, organizing, coordinating policy formation, problem solving and program development.

For instance, in order to coordinate separate, specialized parts of a unit, an NCO needs a certain level of technical knowledge of how the various parts relate to each other. He must be able to visualize and anticipate how changes in one part of the unit's operations will affect the other parts. Otherwise, he won't be able to synchronize the overall operation.

Task Competence and Self Confidence. NCOs provide and create the capabilities for significant victories on the battlefield. This is why NCOs must know procedures, methods and techniques involved in pursuing the unit's objectives. They must be highly proficient in using the tools of their trade.

Technical and tactical competence in their jobs gives sergeants confidence when directing subordinates and helps them make effective decisions. Competent, confident NCOs are more likely to make good decisions and influence others to help them implement the decisions to accomplish the mission.

At the same time, they must recognize their own weaknesses—knowing when to seek help or advice is a positive attribute. Such flexibility allows good leaders to avoid wasted effort on counterproductive courses of actions.

Human Relations Skills. In addition, because sergeants are first-line leaders and interact with soldiers on an hourly basis, human relations skills and making good humanistic decisions are critical to relate effectively to seniors and peers alike. The first-line leader must be a good communicator who demonstrates insight when dealing with social situations. He must be considerate of others and able to instill a spirit of cooperation among all the members of his team.

These abilities are essential for NCOs to establish rapport with subordinates, peers, superiors and outsiders. When a sergeant is not sensitive to the attitudes, feelings and needs of his soldiers, he won't be able to anticipate reactions to his orders accurately, making decision making difficult.

1. **Analyze the Mission**—Brigade receives the division operations order (OPORD), conducts an analysis and issues a warning order (WARNO).
2. **Determine the Situation**—Brigade commander determines his intent and guidance.
3. **Develop Courses of Action (COAs)**—Brigade develops COAs and determines the high-payoff target list (HPTL).
4. **Analyze COAs**—Brigade analyzes and wargames the various COAs, determining the best COAs for the commander's consideration.
5. **Compare COAs**—This is a continuation of the brigade's wargaming of the COAs with the brigade staff briefing the commander on his COA options.
6. **Decide on COA**—Commander determines the COA; brigade then prepares for/rehearses and executes the COA.

The Rational Decision-Making Model (Graham T. Allison) Parallel to the Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP). The six steps in the rational decision-making model are similar to the steps in the MDMP; however, the latter carries the COA on into execution.

Values-Based Decision Making.

Quality NCO leadership goes beyond the traits and skills already discussed. NCOs must master the process of decision-making to enhance their effectiveness for their units and the Army, including using resources efficiently.

Decision making is the process of evaluating two or more options to reach the best possible outcome. Decision makers incorporate perception, interpretation, option generation and evaluation into the process.

Because NCOs face problems and issues calling for decision making daily, they must consider the requirements and directives when making choices. They also must be able to anticipate the effect the current situation will have on future requirements.

NCOs must continually evaluate each situation and adapt to unpredicted changes in the status quo. From the mountains of Afghanistan to SASO operations in Bosnia—even in administrative offices throughout the Army—sergeants must understand and be able to adjust to the conditions in which they must operate.

Two authors, Graham T. Allison and Thomas L. Saaty, have proposed processes for decision making. Allison developed a six-step process that uses an analysis approach to decision making.² Saaty developed the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), a concept for making values-focused decisions as compared to alternatives-focused decisions.³

Allison describes his rational decision-making model in six steps: mission analysis, situation analysis, course of action (COA) development, COA analysis, COA comparison and the decision. This model and others similar to it describe the process the Army uses daily in multiple ways. For instance, the military decision-making process

(MDMP) for combat operations is a decision making model. See the figure for a comparison of Allison's model and the brigade MDMP.

Using Allison's model, the NCO, for instance in a military contingency, begins by collecting information to determine the requirements to accomplish the mission. He then helps formulate goals and objectives based on the information obtained from the mission analysis. Next, he analyzes the situation and advises seniors of the details of the relevant factors, such as framework, operational area, restrictions, assumptions and deductions.

Based on this analysis, he helps identify COAs. He analyzes each COA for adequacy and feasibility and then evaluates them by weighing its advantages against its disadvantages. NCOs must participate in the final selection of the best COA in light of military operational successes and organizational capabilities.

Saaty says decision making is either values-focused or alternatives-focused and argues that decision making should be based on values, not alternatives. Alternatives-focused thinking is when the decision maker determines what alternatives are available and then chooses the best one—the one that solves the problem and is efficient, cost-effective and feasible to implement.

Values-focused thinking is when the decision maker decides what he wants as the outcome, based on his values, and figures out how to make it happen. He chooses his best values-based alternative and works to make it a reality.

While decision making usually focuses on a choice among alternatives, Saaty proposes that the underlying rationale in any decision problem should be the desire to avoid undesirable consequences while achieving desirable



NCOs who guard the War on Terrorism prisoners of war in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, struggle with integrity issues daily. (US Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 1st Class Shane T. McCoy)

ones. Although Saaty's process recognizes that fundamental values can result in the decision maker's identifying decision opportunities and developing better alternatives, the intent is to be proactive and select more attractive alternatives before reaching a conclusion.⁴

AHP is a highly flexible decision-making process; it allows for change in the selected COA. For example, it allows an NCO to gather input for a decision, make a values-based decision affecting his soldiers, test the sensitivity of his solution on his soldiers and make changes as necessary. The advantage is the AHP process recognizes the potential for the NCO to fine-tune a COA as the situation changes around him.

Finally, AHP provides a framework for NCOs' participation in decision making or problem solving. Ideas and judgments, when questioned, can be strengthened or weakened by input.

The way to shape the future is through team participation, bargaining and compromise. Although team participation takes time and may initially complicate the process of implementing a decision, the benefit of incorporating diverse input in the decision-making process outweighs the potential negative effect.

Understandably, in many situations there will not be enough time to get a volume of input for or fine tune a solution. However, if NCOs exercise these skills in situations when time is not a factor, the process will become second nature and useful, even in a clock-critical crisis in military operations.

Army Values and Decision Making. Army Values are extremely important

to NCO decision making: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honesty, Integrity, and Personal Courage (LDRSHIP). The following are two examples of how NCOs apply Army Values to their decision making.

NCOs face decisions affecting their integrity on many occasions. Integrity is steadfast obedience to a strict moral or ethical code and the ability to make firm and complete decisions without compromising mission objectives.

For instance, the NCOs who guard the War on Terrorism prisoners of war in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, struggle with integrity issues daily. Each must adhere consistently to strict procedures and abide by stringent rules, regulations and national/international laws pertaining to the treatment of prisoners of war while under the watchful eyes of the media and international authorities. Each must follow all the rules and laws with complete objectivity, regardless of his negative feelings about the group that attacked his nation or his personal bias for or against one or more of the individual prisoners. At the same time, he must conduct reasonable assessments of situations and demonstrate sound initiative under special situations while upholding the rules of engagement—behavior key to the success of any NCO.

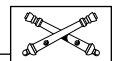
Integrity in an NCO is crucial for identifying shortcomings and enforcing standards. For instance, when a soldier is identified as overweight, the Weight Control NCO must enforce the standards of the Army weight control program. He should not ignore standards because the soldier is a hard worker

or a peer. The NCO must consider the good of the Army and ultimately the good of the overweight soldier and make the values-based decision. Often, the NCO will have to choose "the hard right over the easy wrong."

In this situation, the NCO would identify the individual for the overweight program and use his human relation skills to work with the soldier to develop goals for losing weight without breaking down the soldier's self-respect. This action implements a values-based decision, one that solves the problem and works with the individual affected by the decision.

To ignore the overweight problem because of a reenlistment goal, a promotion or because the soldier is a senior leader impairs the NCO's credibility and integrity. When he fails to enforce standards, he compromises the unit's combat readiness.

The reality is that sergeants will face problem-solving issues requiring decisions on a daily basis. Today's NCO must approach his job armed with essential leadership traits and an understanding of not only the decision-making process, but also the importance of values in that process.



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Endnotes:

1. Gary R. Yukl, Ph.D., *Leadership in Organizations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981), 85-87.
2. Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971) 255-256.
3. Thomas L. Saaty, *Decision Making for Leaders* (Belmont, CA: Lifetime Learning Publications, 1982), 22-26.
4. Ibid.